

The Mysteries of the Tao

Wang Jie

The Mysteries of the Tao

(道玄篇)

By Wang Jie

Translated by Eva Wong

Note: *The Mysteries of the Tao* is known in Chinese as 道玄篇 (*Tao-hsüan p'ien / Dàoxuán piān*), and was written sometime from the late Yuan Dynasty to the early Ming Dynasty (late 14th Century CE). The author, Wang Jie (王玠), is also known by the name Wang Daoyuan (王道淵) and the Taoist epithet Hunranzi (混然子). This English translation was originally published in Eva Wong's anthology *Nourishing the Essence of Life: The Outer, Inner, and Secret Teachings of Taoism* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2004).

1. *The Tao*

The Tao embodies the sky and the earth; therefore, it can give birth to them. Sky and earth embody the ten thousand myriad things; therefore they can nourish all creation. Despite their diversity, all things contain the spark of the Tao. The Tao is void and without form. When the Tao gives birth to things, however, structure and form emerge. Thus, form is the abode of the Tao, and spirit is its workings. All things follow the cycle of movement and stillness embodied in the Great Ultimate (t'ai-chi). Nothing departs from the principles the Tao.

2. *The Mysterious Limit*

That which is the Great Limitless (wu-chi) is called the Tao. That which is the Great Ultimate is called the body. Within the body is another body: this body is the celestial mind. When the celestial mind is anchored and still, it will keep the workings of the spirit in balance. Consequently, that which directs all things will be empty and numinous. When the spirit is numinous and clear, the ten thousand things will return to the Tao. When the spirit is

distracted by phenomena in the world, we will stray from our natural course. This is not because the Tao has distanced itself from humanity but because humanity has distanced itself from the Tao.

3. Giving Life

We are endowed with the energy of life when we are born. Accompanying the energy of life is original nature. Original nature is the spirit, and the energy of life is vapor (ch'i). Spirit directs the body while vapor protects it. The spirit will not stray if we hold on to it; the vapor will not be lost if we nurture it. When spirit and vapor are one, the Tao within us will grow, and we will be able to attain longevity and be liberated from the dust of the mundane.

4. Understanding the Principles

The Tao does not owe its existence to anything; therefore it can give birth to all things. When manifested, however, the Tao is no longer empty. When its structure becomes function, the Tao gives birth to humanity. Because humankind has its foundation in the Tao, it can understand the constancy of the sky and the earth, discover the chambers of yin and yang, intuit the principles of procreation and transformation, and know its place in the grand scheme of things. The sage is someone who has penetrated these principles and understood the Tao.

5. The Subtle Function

Sky and earth are manifestations of yin and yang, and hidden in yin and yang are the secret workings of the universe. Yang initiates and yin receives. Yin gives form its substance and yang gives it essence. Ascending and descending, yin and yang are always together. It is in this way that all things are paired and grouped according to their kind. Male is associated with activity, and female is associated with stillness. Thus, looking at yin and yang, the nature of the sky and the earth can be intuited.

6. Humanity

When humans attain the vapor of life, they live. When things receive the vapor of life, they exist. The one undifferentiated spirit embodies both original nature and life, and original nature and life owe their existence to heaven. Some humans are kind and some are cruel. Some things are

benevolent and some are malevolent. Why? This is because their vapors are manifested differently; it is not because they differ in original nature. Things may favor and emphasize different aspects of the Tao, but the Tao does not favor anything.

7. Embodying Form

Within the universe, there is nothing that does not follow some laws of existence, and there is nothing that does not embody the Tao. When things take on a form, they will develop tendencies. With the emergence of tendencies, the forms will have feelings. When feelings take hold, certain actions will follow. The Tao is manifested in forms. Thus, it can proliferate and be transformed. There is nothing that the Tao cannot become, and there is nothing with which it cannot merge. Although the dragon and the tiger are aroused, we must learn discipline and not be attached to their workings.

8. Dragon and Tiger

The dragon sighs and the tiger roars. The dragon embodies the principle of yang, and the tiger embodies the essence of yin. The yang dragon and yin tiger work in subtle ways. When the dragon sighs, clouds are formed. When the tiger roars, the winds whistle. When there are changes in the wind and clouds, thunder will shake the earth, and dragon and tiger will unite to become one breath. These processes are not driven by emotions. Rather, through the actions of the sage, the spirit moves in mysterious ways, allowing the ten thousand things to copulate and be created.

9. Leadership

Above, the sky covers; below, the earth holds. In this way, the ten thousand things are created and nourished. When a sage takes on the position of leadership, the nation will be peaceful and the people will be harmonious. Those with great abilities are given great responsibilities, and those with lesser abilities are given lesser responsibilities. The people are your brothers, sisters, and children. When you forget your desires, your people will be empty of desire; when you are content, your people will be content; and when you follow the principle of noninterference, your people will not interfere in the affairs of others. This was how Yao the sage ruled. Although

he led his people for fifty years, he had no conception of what it means to rule and be ruled.

10. Virtue

In his position of leadership, the sage is not willful, egotistic, intellectualizing, or conceited. Rather, he is humble and considerate in his actions toward others. Because he is not willful, he can listen to his people. Because he is not egotistic, he can respect those who are virtuous. Because he does not intellectualize, he can understand the nature of things. Because he is not conceited, he can appreciate the achievements of others. Because he cultivates virtue and spreads it for the benefit of everyone, he is honored and respected by all.

11. Ruler and Ministers

A ruler cannot govern without ministers and advisers, and ministers cannot carry out their duties without leadership. If ruler and ministers work together, the nation will never be conquered. If the ruler treats her subjects as children, her subjects will regard her as their mother. When mother and son care for each other, there will be no gossip or slander. Just as the Tao gives life, a mother should protect the son and a son should care for his mother. If the mother and son within us are not separated, we will attain longevity and not die. The sage's desires are no different from those of others. It is only that there are no objects for the desires to attach themselves to.

12. The Tao and Virtue

The Tao is the greatest form of compassion, and virtue is the foundation of compassion. True compassion is not sentimental but follows the natural way of the Tao. True virtue is not righteous but also follows the natural way of the Tao. When you attain this virtue, you will attain the heart of the Tao, understand the principles, and penetrate the nature of the universe. When original nature is empty, you will value life and will come to know that all things are part of the Tao and virtue.

13. Succession

To name someone as successor, you must be sure that he or she is worthy. This is something the ancients had taught. The sage does not use his

country to serve him; rather he works for the good of his nation. If the ruler can find a worthy successor, the people will be harmonious. Otherwise, the people will be rebellious. When King Yao retired, he named Shun as successor because he knew that Shun was virtuous while his own son was not. Shun named Yü as successor because he knew that Yü was worthy while his own son was not. Yü first named Yi as successor. Later he passed the kingship to his own son Kai because he heard the people sing praises to Kai and not to Yi. After that, kingship became hereditary. When a descendant is worthy, there is no need to look for a successor outside the family.

14. Protecting (the Body) and Keeping (the Principles)

Know the will of heaven and you will be able to preserve your body. Understand the words of the sages and you will be able to follow the principles of the Tao. If you can preserve your body, you will live long. If you live according to the principles of the Tao, you will be able to do great deeds. If you can be around for a long time, your family and country will not be endangered. If you can do great deeds, your children and grandchildren will always be safe. When there is no danger, you will never be harmed.

15. Emptiness and Clarity

If the mirror is empty and clear, you will naturally see the human mind's devious ways. If the mind is empty, you will naturally know the difference between good and bad. In emptiness form is exposed, and in clarity desire is revealed. Form and desire are both illusions and are not part of the underlying reality (of the Tao). Therefore, the great sages have always valued emptiness.

16. Preserving the Body

Where there is life, there will be death. Stray from the Tao, and you will lose your original nature. Just as horses without bridles run wild, people who do not know their original home are led astray by wayward emotions. If your desires are deep, you will bring ruin to yourself. Many people have destroyed themselves this way. The sage always follows the will of heaven. She understands her place in the grand scheme of things; she respects all

things, preserves her energy, and cultivates her original nature. In this way, she can be at one with the ten thousand things.

17. Rituals and Music

Rituals and music cannot be absent in daily life. Ritual fosters respect in the heart, and music makes the body harmonious. If there is respect in the heart, everything will work properly. If the body is harmonious, the hundred guardian spirits will not stray from their places. When the guardian spirits stay within, energy will be plentiful and will flow into the Void.

18. Spirit and Breath

If you cultivate the spirit well, the light within will shine day and night. If you circulate the breath well, the void will be present in each cycle of inhalation and exhalation. The spirit resides in the breath, and the breath lives in the house of the spirit. When spirit and breath unite, you will attain great clarity.

19. Completeness and Brightness

If you focus solely on the inside, you will neglect the outside. If you focus entirely on the outside, you will neglect the inside. This is not the way of the Tao. What does it mean to be complete and bright? It means that there is no difference between the outside and the inside. Outside and inside exist only because form exists. When form is absent, function can be manifested. The way of the sage is circular; therefore, he leaves no trace in the world.

20. Dissatisfaction

Those who are skilled are not satisfied; those who are unskilled are also not satisfied. The skilled are not satisfied because they are always ready to learn; the unskilled are not satisfied because they desire knowledge. If you think that your learning is inadequate, your nature will become bright. If you are greedy for knowledge, your nature will become dark and dim. If your mind is bright, you will enter the sacred. If your mind is dim, you will be trapped in ignorance. Enlightenment and ignorance are separated by a thin boundary. You should understand this well.

21. Learning

Anyone can learn. The intelligent person learns in order to understand the nature of things. The ignorant person learns in order to become an expert in one area. If you are knowledgeable in many things, you will not be anxious. If you can penetrate the principles of things, you will understand the whys and wherefores of things. If you are not anxious, you will understand the nature of all things. If you are connected to the origin, you will attain the ways of heaven and earth. This is because nature and heaven both follow the natural way.

22. The Middle Way

The sages follow the Middle Way. This is why they are more enlightened than the scholars, who are themselves more enlightened than the ignorant. The sage's learning is round, while the scholar's knowledge is angular. Knowledge that is round is adaptable, while knowledge that is angular is inflexible. This is why the sage's learning is higher than that of the scholar and the knowledge of the scholar is higher than that of the ignorant.

23. Power and Respect

The mind of the sage cannot be fathomed. When it is great, it can be transformed into the Limitless. When it is expansive, it can extend to all directions and surpass all things. Virtue is the driving force behind the three (realms) and the five (elements). Empty in the center, it anchors the four seasons and works for the welfare of all. Caring for all things, it has the capacity to understand the properties of the ten thousand things.

24. Transformation

The Tao in its greatness is the moving force behind the workings of the universe. Dark and mysterious, it is embodied in all things. Scrutinize it, and you cannot see its boundaries; try to tunnel into it, and you cannot reach its end. Expand it, and it can cover the earth and the sky; shrink it, and it can be contained in the smallest particle. It was there before we were born, and it has existed before things were named.

25. Penetrating the Subtleties

Just as a skillful tongue is the key to good speech and a strong hand is the key to a firm grip, attaining the highest principles is the key to penetrating the subtleties.

26. The Key to the Tao

The key to the Tao lies in the One Cavity. If generative energy is plentiful, vital energy will be preserved. If vital energy is preserved, the spirit will become omniscient. Do not deplete even one of these energies. If you lose one, you will lose the others. If you lose all the energies, how can you attain the Tao?

27. Gain and Loss

Do not be elated by gains or saddened over losses. If you are not satisfied with what you have, you will lose it. If you know what you have lost, you will be able to recover it. Those who possess much will lose what they have, and those who have lost what they have will regain what was lost. Only those who have attained the Tao will understand the true meaning of gain and loss.

28. Quieting the Mind

Plants grow because they are rooted in the earth. Humans live because the mind is rooted in original nature and life. When the soil is fertile, branches and leaves will be strong; when the mind is empty, the Tao and virtue will complement and strengthen each other. It is a pity that people do not know their original nature. They think that by desiring, they can capture material things in their minds, not knowing that it is their minds that are imprisoned. Using their feelings to hold on to things, they do not know that ultimately it is their feelings that are being controlled. Lose your attachment to things and you will gain. Allow yourself to be controlled by things and you will lose. Those who know the Tao understand this well.

29. Abandoning Intention

If you abandon intention, the birds will not be suspicious. If your intention is stirred, the birds will fly away. Why? This is because you can fool the form but not the spirit. Even if your spirit moves slightly, the other's spirit will know. This is the way things are: nothing can be hidden from the spirit. The sage knows that she and the ten thousand things are connected. Therefore, she always abandons her intention and keeps her mind empty.

30. True Emptiness

The Tao is invisible. If you try to grasp it, you will be imprisoned by appearances. The Tao is not empty. If you try to hold on to it, you will become attached to emptiness. Those who are attached either to appearances or emptiness do not understand the Tao. That which does not appear is true appearance. That which is not empty is true emptiness. True appearances and true emptiness are part of the ten thousand things. In function, they separate, and in transformation, they are inexhaustible.

31. Having and Not Having

To have and not to possess is the highest order of learning. To not have but to possess is the lowest order of learning. The wisdom of the sage is wide and deep; he knows that having does not mean possessing. The knowledge of the common person is narrow and shallow; he thinks that not having is not possessing. “I dare not put myself ahead of everyone” — these are the words of Lao-tzu. “I do not dare to think that I am righteous and virtuous” — these are the words of Confucius. “Having is really not having, and that which has substance can be empty” — these are the words of Yen-tzu. This is why those with great virtue occupy the highest places of honor and those of little virtue are the least worthy.

32. Respect

If you respect others, others will respect you. If you despise others, others will despise you. You should respect all things; above all, you should respect all people. The sage ruler considers his people his children. He honors those with abilities and values virtue. He does not belittle others; therefore others do not belittle him.

33. The Art of Ruling

There are five principles of ruling a country. Promote virtue in the nation and the people will be harmonious. Exercise integrity and the people will honor you. Teach the rites and rituals and people will respect you and each other. Use intelligence to observe the affairs of the country and the people will be prosperous and contented. Be honest and trustworthy and the people will support you. Although these principles have different names, they all come from the same source. The sage abides in emptiness and understands the nature of the Tao. Therefore, she can apply its principles with ease.

34. Observing the Tao

If you want to observe the Tao, observe the sea. Because the sea is the lowest point on earth, it can receive the waters of the hundred rivers and contain them. Great waves rise from its depths, and dragons, fishes, shrimps, and crabs frolic in its embrace. The mind of the sage is like the sea. It can contain the territories of the ten thousand nations. In cultivating the mind, the sage knows that the emptier the mind, the deeper it can penetrate the mysteries. In action, the sage knows that the more he gives, the more he will receive. Thus, nobles, ministers, and citizens all delight in his embrace. This is how the Tao is manifested in the world: it occupies the lowest place, but it is honored as the highest.

35. Emptiness

Form is created from emptiness. After form emerges, it seeks to return to emptiness. Mind and spirit are originally empty. Energy (ch'i), however, has form. If the mind is empty, the spirit will be calm and energy will be plentiful. If the mind is wayward, the spirit will leave and energy will be corrupted. The mind of the sage is always empty because she knows how to cultivate her spirit and energy.

36. The Constant Mind

If the mind is constant, it will dwell in the constancy of the Tao. If the mind is not constant, it will distance itself from the constancy of the Tao. If the mind is not corrupted, the constancy of the Tao will not change. If the mind strays, the constancy of the Tao will be unbalanced. The sages therefore always keep their minds clear and still and look inward into themselves.

37. Dedication and Filial Piety

Those who are dedicated are usually filial, and those who are filial are usually dedicated. When dedication is applied to the family, it becomes an offspring's filial gratitude to his parents. When dedication is applied to the nation, it becomes a minister's filial gratitude to the leader. A ruler is a parent; therefore, dedication to the leader is an expression of filial piety. Those who are dedicated and filial are simply following the principles of the Tao.

38. Integrity

Confucius would not drink water from a well belonging to bandits. Ts'ang-tzu turned his cart around in front of a village that had no sense of honor. The ancient sages refused to be acquainted with people with questionable attitudes. This is because they all followed the principles of the Way.

39. Moderation

Sages practice moderation. Attentive to the needs of humanity, they propagate the benevolence of the Tao. They do not favor one or the other but treat all as equal. They take from those who have and give to those who have not. Because of this, those who are disadvantaged will benefit, and those who are privileged will be humbled. The destitute will have enough; the rich will not be overly wealthy; and there will be harmony among all areas of society. This is because the sage follows the way of moderation.

40. Application and Function

If you seek the Tao in truth and honesty, the Tao will not stray from you. Apply the principles of the Tao at the appropriate time and you will receive its benefits. If the inside is stable, the spirit will be harmonious. If the outside functions smoothly, the spirit will be transformed naturally. If you observe the Tao in stillness, you will see that the Tao is not entirely without motion. If you observe the Tao in movement, you will see that the Tao is not entirely without stillness. This is because movement and stillness are both part of the Tao.

41. Spirit and Emptiness

The spirit embodies the Void of the sky and the earth. The movement of the spirit in things cannot be imagined, conceptualized, spoken of, or seen. Why? Because in thinking about it we will not understand it, and in conceptualizing it we will not be sincere. Moreover, that which can be talked about will not be pure, and that which can be seen is not real. The smallest can be the manifestation of the universe, and the largest can be hidden in a grain of dust. Entering water and not getting wet, walking through fire and not getting burned, penetrating metals and moving through stone, traveling to the realms of the living and the dead, and taming and commanding ghosts and spirits — these are some of the things that can be done by those who understand the Tao.

42. Penetrating and Understanding

Do not let the mind cling to things. Never force your actions in anything you do. If the mind clings, original nature will not emerge. If you force things, you will not penetrate the principles. Let your mind be united with the celestial mind and you will understand the workings of all things. Let your actions follow the natural way and you will penetrate the principles of all things. This is why the sages hide their minds within the natural phenomena and never force their actions.

43. Fortune and Misfortune

Those who follow the principles of heaven are favored by fortune. Those who serve themselves are visited by misfortune. If you follow the way of heaven, you will be content and want nothing. If you follow desires, you will never satisfy your wants. Those who are content are usually virtuous; thus, they are always protected by the Tao. Those who are greedy will lose everything. As they are blinded by evil ways, their attachment to material things will cause them to lose not only their original nature but also their lives.

44. Knowing the Limits

Fish swim in the deep rivers and wild beasts roam the mountains. Animals know their limits and do not go beyond their natural habitats. The human mind, however, does not know its original home and will often stray beyond its limits. The mind is the ruler of the body. Attain the (real) mind and you will live. Lose it and you will die.

45. The Nature of Action

When the Tao moves, the One gives rise to the two. In this way, creation emerges from copulation, good and bad oppose each other, life and death follow each other, hardness and softness conflict with each other, and gratitude and revenge balance each other. Those who do not understand the nature of action will fight the natural way. This is because they have been misled. However, those who understand the way of the Tao will preserve their form and let things exercise their natural functions. Knowing when to act and when to be still, they let their feelings return to their original nature, let their original nature return to emptiness, and let the emptiness merge

with the ultimate reality. In this way, they are in harmony with the natural way.

46. The Natural Way

Spiders weave webs and dung beetles camouflage themselves as black balls — this is part of their nature. The sage learns by observing the natural order. He tells the people to hold on to simplicity, measure the amount of water in the well before they drink, and farm according to their needs. He does not encourage them to be scheming and knowledgeable. As a result, the people do not harm one another. Till the day of their death, they delight in harmony and simple happiness, never lodging complaints against each other. Although there are laws, there is no need to enforce them.

47. Natural Response

When deities appear, evil spirits will hide — this is the way of the Tao. When the dragon and tiger move, the weather will change. The sage tunes her actions according to changes in nature. This is what is meant by the mind responding naturally to the movement of the Tao. The ways of deities cannot be understood by evil spirits, and the activity of the dragon and tiger cannot be fathomed by animals and insects. Therefore, those whose actions can be predicted cannot be considered sages. Sages can do great deeds because their spirit is upright and they are steadfast in their courage. Because they teach according to the ways of the Tao, the world respects and follows them.

48. Pride

People who value their wealth tend to be proud. Those who value their political power tend to be willful. Those who value their learning tend to be haughty. Those who value being loved usually indulge in excesses. These are four illnesses that plague humanity. If you are proud, you won't last long. If you are willful, you won't survive. If you are haughty, you will achieve nothing. If you love yourself, you will meet with the misfortune of abandonment. Therefore, the sage is not proud when he is wealthy, not willful when he is in a position of power, not haughty when he is learned, and not egotistic when he is loved. He delights in simple living and does not

expose himself to danger. In movement and stillness he is in harmony with the Tao and close to the natural way.

49. Harmony

When heaven loses harmony, the sun and moon will lose their light. When earth loses harmony, there will be landslides and avalanches. When a person loses harmony, the generative energy will dissipate. When the four seasons lose harmony, there will be disasters. Why? Because when there is harmony in heaven, the sky will be clear and expansive and the sun and moon will be bright. When there is harmony on earth, earth will be balanced and strong and the mountains and rocks will be stable. When there is harmony within a person, circulation will be smooth and energy will accumulate naturally. When there is harmony in the four seasons, changes in the weather will be orderly and the ten thousand things will be nourished. Those who follow the clockwise path are governed by changes in the yin and the yang. Those who take the reverse path, however, will be able to walk in the void.

50. The Nature of Things

Day and night are manifestations of the vapors of the sky; birth and death are manifestations of the coming and going of energy. The cycles of day and night and birth and death follow the principles of the nature of things. Where there is day, there is night; where there is birth, there will be death; where there is gathering, there will be dissipation — this is what we would expect normally. However, when the spirit is gathered, sky and earth will be bright and empty, and there will be no birth and death and no coming and going. You will arrive at your destination without having to walk there; things will come to fruition without planning; and goals will be accomplished without action. Understand these principles and you will be able to transcend life and death and be liberated from the confines of sky and earth.

51. Words and Speech

The sage uses words to reveal the Tao and speak about the intangible. The learned person uses words to describe the Tao and talk about the tangible. Words that are directed toward the intangible will reveal the principles of

pre-creation. On the other hand, words that are directed toward the tangible will reveal the principles of post-creation. If the learned person can dissociate himself from form, abandon intelligence, gather and focus the spirit within, and not be attached to structure, he will become a sage.

52. Non-competition

The Tao does not compete; those who compete do not follow the ways of the Tao. The Tao is not grasping; those who grasp do not understand the principles of the Tao. If you compete, you will attend only to differences in people's intelligence. If you grasp, you will always compare yourself with others. Concerned with petty matters, you will have abandoned the Tao and forgotten about virtue. The sage appears dull and dim, but her wisdom is like a piece of hidden jade. In her interaction with others she is not competitive or grasping. Because her spirit is in balance, she is in harmony with the sky and earth in all seasons.

53. The Transformations of the Tao

The Tao is transformed into vapor; vapor is transformed into blood; blood is transformed into form; form is transformed into things; and things are in turn transformed into other things. All transformations can be traced back to the One. Spirit is a manifestation of the One. When vapor is impure, the spirit will be evil; when vapor is pure, the spirit will be bright. Feelings can be transformed into non-feelings, and non-feelings can be transformed into feelings. This is because they both originate from the same vapor. Although things appear different, they all come from the same source. Observe the great transformation at the beginning of creation and you will understand the meaning of the formless and the nameless.

54. Social Responsibility

If you are a government official, you should apply the principles of the Tao to serve the people. If you are the ruler of the country, you should exercise virtue and serve the country. When the citizens are respectful and grateful to the government, it is a sign that the virtue of the ruler has reached the people. When there is freedom of speech, the feelings of the people will be communicated to those who rule. When no barriers exist between ruler and

ruled, the country will be peaceful and prosperous. Those who use country and people to further their own interests, however, will meet with disaster.

55. Honorable People

Honorable people are clear about their intentions. If they choose to use their intelligence, they will serve the country; if not, they will live as a hermit in the mountains and forests. In positions of wealth and power, they are not proud; when impoverished they do not blame others. Advancing and retreating according to the Situation, they balance movement and stillness. Following the will of heaven, they do not harbor deceit in their hearts. Such are the virtues of honorable people.